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GWEN JOHN

1876–1939

The Arts Council
OF GREAT BRITAIN
1946

FOREWORD

THE MEMORIAL EXHIBITION of Gwen John's paintings and drawings, held at Matthiesen Ltd. this autumn, revealed to many for the first time the high quality and sensitive beauty of her work. It is due to the generous help of her nephew Mr. Edwin John, from whose collection we have borrowed and to whom the Council is deeply grateful, that it has been possible to tour a selection from the exhibition and so spread further afield the knowledge of this charming artist. To this selection has been added several paintings and drawings which have not hitherto been exhibited. The Council also wishes to thank Mr. Augustus John for allowing his introduction to the Memorial Catalogue to be reprinted, and for the loan of a drawing, Mrs. Augustus John, Mr. Michael Astor and Messrs. Matthiesen for the loan of pictures. Where lenders' names are not given the pictures are for sale and prices may be had on application.

INTRODUCTION

GWENDOLEN MARY JOHN was born about 1876 at Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire. She showed at an early age a decided bent for drawing and painting. In due course she entered the Slade School of Art. Her originality and talent were not unrecognised. Soon after leaving the Slade, Gwen moved to Paris and became a pupil at Whistler's School. Here she acquired that methodicity which she was to develop to a point of elaboration undreamt of by her Master. "Art is the science of beauty", said Whistler, so taking this to heart, Gwen John proceeded to cultivate painting in a scientific spirit. She used to prepare her canvasses according to a recipe of her own, and invented a system of numbering her colour mixtures, which, however helpful to her, makes her notes on painting and schemes for pictures unintelligible to anyone else. She sold her work rarely and with reluctance, and then only at a price far below that which her clients were willing to pay. She had no competitive sense and rarely went out of her way to study the work of her contemporaries, but was familiar with the National Gallery and the Louvre. When asked her opinion of an exhibition of Cézanne's water-colours, her reply, scarcely audible, was: "These are very good, but I prefer my own."

A mass of documents, discovered after her death, include correspondence, extracts from devotional and other works and notes and meditations of her own. From these I shall quote, for they afford first-hand clues to her life and character. She usually had occasion to write in French, though often incorrectly as regards grammar and spelling. At Paris she made the acquaintance of Rodin. He admired and acclaimed her gifts: *"Vous êtes bel artiste"* were his words, which she reported to me with natural elation. She used to pose for him, for she had, as he said, *"un corps admirable"*. Commissioned by the Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers to execute a Memorial to Whistler, Rodin produced a colossal figure of my sister holding a medallion of the painter. This was rejected by the Society, following the advice of the late Derwent Wood, on the grounds of an unfinished arm, and instead a replica of the *"Bourgeois de Calais"* took its place on the Embankment. (Nothing could be less suitable for its purpose!) Gwen John's association with Rodin was close and enduring. His numerous brief letters to her which remain are always sympathetic and appreciative, but constantly voice his concern for her well-being and his dissatisfaction with a way of life, which he judged to be anything but in accordance with the rules of health:

"Il faudrait changer de chambre qui est trop humide et n'a pas de soleil." "Soignez-vous, parce que vous êtes pâle." "Vous avez de grandes facultés de sentir et de penser." "Cette lettre pour vous dire de faire toujours vos promenades et de bien vous soigner, car nous poserons bientot." "Je vous prie, chère amie, de ne pas vous rendre malade." "Courage, petite amie, moi je suis si fatigué et vieux . . .

mais j'aime votre petit coeur si dévoué, patience et pas de violence." "Je suis parti à Marseilles pour 6 jours. Faites, ma petite amie, des lettres que vous m'enverrez. Mangez bien, car il me semble que vous vous négligez. C'est ce qui vous donne mal à la tête. Je me reposerai le plus que je pourrai." Rodin himself seems often to be *"enrhumé", "grippé"* or *"fatigué"*. Gwen's friendship with Rainer Maria Rilke, too, was evidently warm and intimate. The poet used to lend her books and help her with his sympathy and understanding. Jacques Maritain was a neighbour at Meudon. Gwen always addressed him as "Dear Master". The brilliant Neo-Thomist adopts a highly authoritative style in his communications with Gwen and enjoins complete obedience which his pupil is only too eager to render. Exercising his English, he writes: "your answer . . . is too much conceit, I don't know what you wrote at more length at first, and I am regretting you don't to have sent me your first writing, since I've ordered you to tell me long and entirely what your mind finds about that subject. I'm *sole* judge of my orders and your sole duty is to obey me." Maritain's niece, Mademoiselle Vèra Oumançoff, next becomes an outstanding object of Gwen's homage. Innumerable letters or draughts of letters to this young lady display a startling mixture of romantic sentiment and catholic piety. Mademoiselle Vèra appears to have been what we call a "sensible" girl, and seeks to curb her admirer's extravagances and keep her conduct within the bounds of reason and the *comme-il-faut*. She might as well have tried to restrain a whirlwind. *"Avez-vous réellement besoin de m'écrire presque tous les jours? Je ne le crois pas—et je crois même que c'est très mauvais pour votre âme—car vous vous attachez trop à une créature, sans même la connaitre pour ainsi dire. Je sais bien que vous avez une grande sensibilité, mais il faut la tourner vers notre Seigneur, vers la Sainte Vierge."* Mademoiselle Vèra disapproved of Gwen's practice of drawing in Church. Gwen to Vèra: *"Vous avez dit que vous ne trouvez pas que c'est un très grand péché de travailler en esprit à mes dessins pendant la grande messe. Je vous ai dit Monsieur le Curé m'a dit que c'est un péché. Alors vous avez dit doucement, s'il a dit cela, c'est un péché. Quand M. le Curé me l'a dit, je n'ai senti ni contrition ni peur . . . mais je ne dessinerai qu'aux Vêpres, Saluts et les Retraites. J'aime prier à l'église comme tout le monde, mais mon esprit n'est pas capable de prier longtemps à la fois . . . Les orphelins habillés avec ces chapeaux noirs au ruban blanc et leurs robes noires aux collerettes blanches me charment, et des autres créatures me charment à l'église. Si je retranche tout cela, il n'y aurait pas assez de bonheur dans ma vie.*

Petite Rêverie après une Défense.

Chère Mademoiselle, quand vous aurez quitté cette vie et que vous paraitrez devant Dieu le Père, il y aura peut-être un petit dialogue comme ceci: Dieu le Père: Eh bien, ma petite fille! Approche-toi: il y a quelque-chose à m'expliquer—Mary (Gwen) qui a été ici avec moi depuis quelque temps m'a dit que tu n'as pas été gentille pour elle—? Vous: Père Eternel et très saint! Il y avait plusieurs raisons pour cela! L'une est que je ne l'ai pas bien compris—C'est vrai que Mère Supérieure

lui a dit qu'elle pourrait me parler et que je la comprendrais, mais O Père Eternel et tout puissant, ce n'était pas si facile que ça!—Dieu le Père: De Grace! Laisse donc Mère Supérieure, je t'en prie! C'était clair comme bonjour. Ce matin-là qu'elle courrait après ton petit frère et toi—en ce moment tout était dit d'elle, TOUT, TOUT, TOUT! Allons! Pas de tristesse! Je ne peux pas me fâcher avec toi, ma petite Vèra! Va trouver Mary, elle est dans la salle Jeanne d'Arc en train de dessiner les enfants de catéchism, Saint Pierre t'indiquera le chemin. Au revoir!"

A moment of revolt: "*Le soir est venu: j'ai été encore malheureuse et je ne peux rien finir, même ma toilette ou la chambre. Je vais à la campagne chercher mon chat. Vous avez dit que je laisse les gens sérieux comme Miss O'Donnell pour courir après des chimères. Oui, vous et elle sont trop sérieuses pour moi. Je n'ai plus envie de vivre. Je n'ai pas envie d'aller chercher le chat . . . Vous êtes toujours injuste. Vous avez montré de l'impolitesse dans votre atelier et dans la rue . . .*"

"*Quand vous me parlez, j'ai souvent l'air, je sais, de ne pas faire attention. Ne vous impatientez pas. Je fais attention, non pas à ce que vous dites, mais à vous même, et cette attention continue tout le temps que vous êtes là: quant aux choses que vous me dites, une partie de mon esprit les inscrit sans que je lui ai donné l'ordre. Elle les inscrit sur ma mémoire comme sur un carnet et quand je vous ai quittée, je peux ouvrir le carnet si je veux et les lire.*" "*Je ne peux pas vous dire comment il est étrange de vous entendre parler de mes dessins . . . Si vous les trouvez mal faits, dites le moi et je changerai de manière, comme je changerais mes vêtements s'ils vous agacent.*"

"*Vous m'avez dit que ma lettre était trop longue. Trop longue pour quoi? Je pense que les âmes dans le Purgatoire doivent sentir un peu comme moi. Je ne vis pas tranquillement comme vous et tout le monde. Quand vous me quittez, pour vous il y aura demain et après demain, tous les jours de la semaine enfin, et en effet c'est cela qui arrive. Poir moi, c'est le dernier jour. Je ne vois pas d'autres: je ne regarde pas en avant . . .*" "*Je suis bizarre.*"

"*Chère Mademoiselle Vèra, vous m'avez dit de prendre toujours mon chapelet. Vous l'avez dit comme si c'est tout naturel pour moi de le prendre quand j'ai des angoisses. Non, je ne le prendrai jamais. J'en ai plusieurs cependant que je vois souvent brisés en plusieurs morceaux dans ma boîte à coton et dans ma boîte à boucles d'oreilles . . .*"

Here is a letter from a child which I fancy Gwen found more satisfactory than most of Mademoiselle Vèra's: "*Orrevoir Mademoiselle Mary je vous remerssie bien je vous donne un gros baisé je vous remerssie de vos petite fleur je vous embrasse de tout mon coeur vous êtes assez bonne pour mois Mademoiselle Mary.*

Editb Brouyer."

Gwen has occasion to criticise Monsieur le Curé de Meudon, who considered it a sin to draw in Church. "*Monsieur le Curé a en outre fait enlever les tableaux des Stations du Chemin qui étaient simples et de belle coloris et les a remplacés par ceux que vous connaissez. (J'ai demandé à Mlle. P. si elle les trouvait beaux, les nouveaux, et elle disait, "Non, ils sont plutot fins".)*

"Monsieur le Curé nous prend de trop bas. C'est désagréable d'être pris de trop bas. Quand nous allons en promenade en Mai, dans le train, en autobus et au déjeuner et à gouter, Monsieur le Curé croit nécessaire de nous faire rire. Il faut adapter ses histoires sans doute à l'esprit le plus bas: ça serait difficile d'être aussi grossière et bête que Suzanne, n'est-ce pas?"

From a letter to one, "Nona": "In Brittany at night, I used to pluck the leaves and grasses from the hedges all dark and misty and when I took them home, I sometimes found my hands were full of flowers. Nona, you are like a sculptor who models the clay in his hands without thinking and suddenly he finds a lovely form."

From a letter to me: "I told you in a letter long ago that I am happy. When illness or death do not interfere, I am. Not many people can say as much. I do not lead a subterranean life (my subterranean life was in Howland Street). If to 'return to life' is to live as I did in London—*Merci, Monsieur!* . . . There are people like plants who cannot flourish in the cold, and I want to flourish . . ."

Some Notes and Meditations of Gwen John

¶ To make something rare and delicate with our lives.
¶ I don't live when I spend time without thought.
¶ I must now be God's child of love.
¶ What regions can you wander in? The land of flowers. The land of humility.
¶ We don't know what we are nor what we may become.
¶ I will aspire to be a saint in spite of all.
¶ Are you fortified by a new hope and thought if again the cloud descended upon you?
¶ Don't be afraid of falling into mediocrity—you would never.
¶ Are we alive or are we dead? Some people are dead though they look as if they are alive.
¶ Let your waiting not be spending but storing.
¶ Do not be vague or wavering. Impose your style. Let it be simple and strong—The short strong stalks of flowers . . .
¶ To work is not to be forgetful.

July, 1923.
You are free only when you have left all. Leave everybody and let them leave you. Then only will you be without fear.

April, 1927.
I accept to suffer always, but Rilke! hold my hand! you must hold me by the hand! Teach me, inspire me, make me know what to do.
Take care of me when my mind is asleep. You began to help me.
You must continue.

Pentecost, 1932.
Don't think (as before) to work for years ahead—and the number possible —you work for one moment . . .

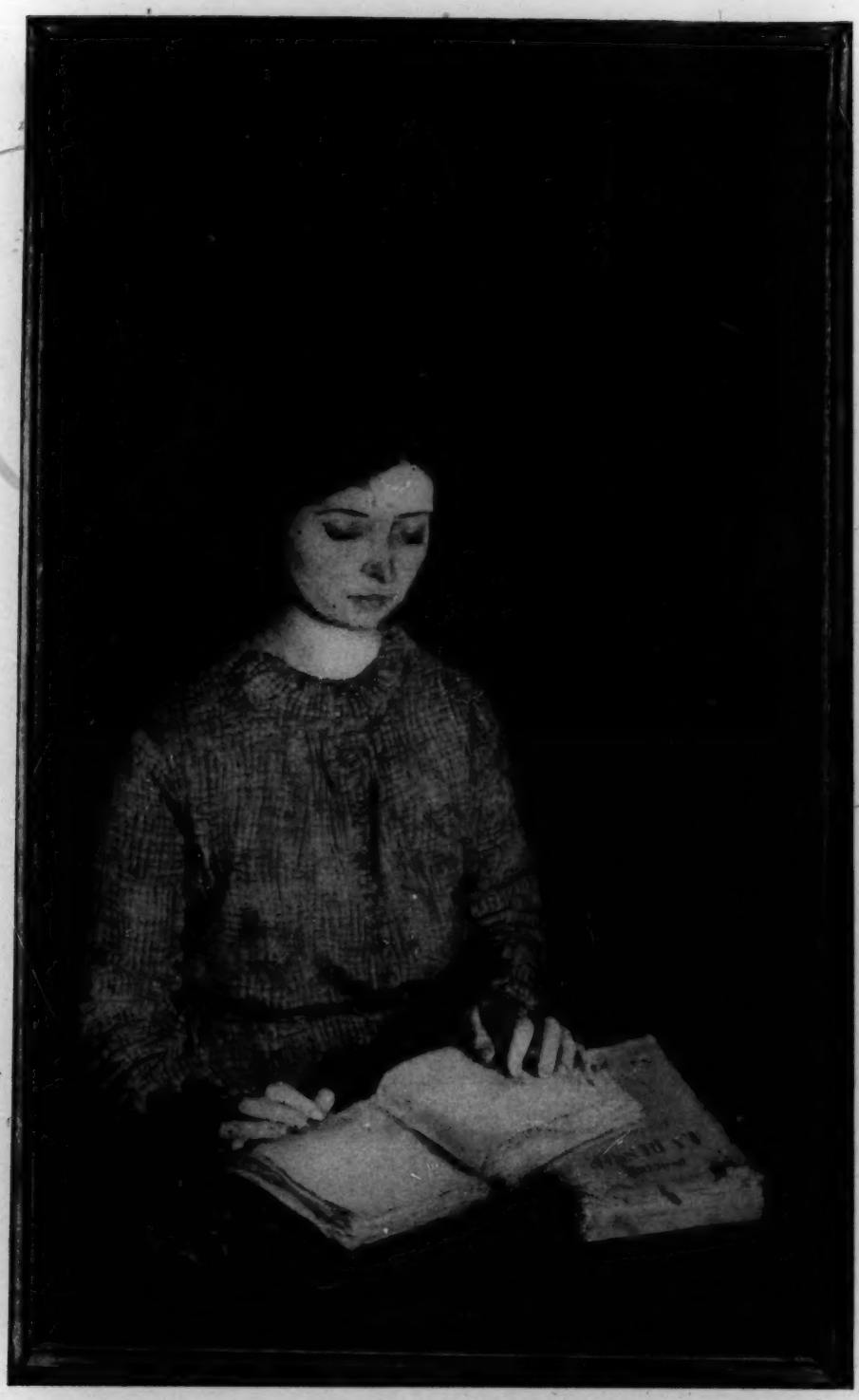
May, 1921.
Travail immédiat, même mauvais, vaut mieux que la rêverie. BAUDELAIRE.

January, 1923.
Harmonies of Colour—*Gueule de Loup* and autumn leaves. Garlic (and its blue-black leaves) and faded primroses and straw.
Mon coeur est comme une mer qui a des petites vagues tristes, mais toutes les neuvièmes vagues sont grandes et heureuses.

I have quoted enough for my purpose. There are, besides such brief notes as the foregoing, many long extracts from the writings of the Saints and other catholic authors and even passages from Schopenhauer, Oscar Wilde, Bertrand Russell, Diderot, William James, Dostoievsky, etc. Unfortunately, except for the *Petite Rêverie*, there is little evidence of my sister's native gaiety and humour in these remnants, which belong on the whole to a period of stress and torment. They were written, of course, without a thought of publication, and it is only after some hesitation that I have decided to avail myself of them sparingly for this introduction. Gwen John's apparent timidity and evasiveness disguised a noble pride and an inflexible will. When, possessed as it were, by one of the "Demons" of whose intrusions she sometimes complained, she was capable of a degree of exaltation combined with ruthlessness which, like a pointed pistol, compelled surrender. But the pistol would be pointed at herself . . . Heroism knows no scruples.

Though she tried to cultivate the *sainte indifférence* recommended by some of her spiritual guides, success in this direction was hardly to be expected while such a heart as was hers continued to beat.

She may have derived some moments of peace, consolation, and even ecstasy, besides much agony of soul from the religion which she had adopted and practised with such fervour, but the discovery that religious people can be just as stupid, insensitive and vulgar as anybody else was inevitable and tragic. It was in art that she found her true happiness. Deciding at last to leave *Rue Terre Neuve* (*"cette maison est si humide, les murs suintent et des petits ruisseaux coulent des murs des escaliers"*), she established herself *Rue Babie*, still at Meudon, in a kind of *hangar* surrounded by a *terrain* convenient for her cats. She paid us a visit in Hampshire and acquired a cottage in the vicinity, where she spent a week or two, every day taking the bus to Bournemouth to sit by the sea. The sea was necessary to her, and her frequent visits to the coast of Brittany were no doubt determined by this need. After her long exile in France, I was surprised to find her speaking with a strong Pembrokeshire accent, up till then hardly perceptible. Latterly I used to try and persuade her to send her work to England, where she had admirers,



I *Dorelia at Toulouse* NO 4

II *Self-Portrait of the Artist at the age of about 20 years* NO 20

III *Half-length of a Girl with a large hat and straw-coloured hair* NO 26

IV *Red House in Twilight* NO 15

but without success, for she had committed herself to an exhibition in New York at the instance of the late Mr. John Quinn of that city, and was working conscientiously and exclusively to that end for years. A number of pictures and drawings appear in fact to have accumulated for despatch to America, but no exhibition was held, and these works have not yet been traced. At last, feeling the old compulsion of the sea upon her, she took the train to Dieppe, where she collapsed on arrival and, taken to a hospital, expired. She had neglected to take any baggage with her, but had not forgotten to make provision for her cats in her absence. Thus, on the 13th September, 1939, died "God's little artist", as, in private, she liked to call herself.

AUGUSTUS JOHN

CATALOGUE

Measurements are given in inches. The catalogue number of works shown in the Memorial Exhibition held at Matthiesen Ltd., London, September–October 1946, *has been given.*

1. *Three-Quarter Length of a Young Woman in a Grey Cloak*
   25 × 17¾; oil on canvas; no. 50 Matthiesen

2. *Three-Quarter Length of a Woman in Mulberry Coloured Dress*
   20½ × 14½; oil on board

3. *A Nun Seated at a Table*
   21½ × 13½; oil on canvas

4. *Dorelia at Toulouse*
   21½ × 12¾; oil on canvas; LENT BY MRS. AUGUSTUS JOHN

5. *Three-Quarter Length of Young Woman in a Red Shawl*
   14½ × 7¾; oil on canvas; no. 37 Matthiesen

6. *A Vase of Flowers*
   16¾ × 13¼; oil on canvas; no. 54 Matthiesen

7. *Three-Quarter Length of a Girl in a Blue Apron with a Cat on Her Lap*
   15¾ × 12½; oil on canvas; no. 44 Matthiesen

8. *Half-Length of a Woman with a Blue Bow, Looking Down*
   13¾ × 10; oil on plywood

9. *Bust of a Girl with Bow before a Pink Background*
   9 × 5½; oil on canvas pasted on panel

10. *Unfinished Study of a Girl in Profile*
    14 × 11; oil on canvas; no. 49 Matthiesen

11. *A Woman Sewing, Monochrome*
    15½ × 9½; oil on canvas; *cf.* no. 14 Matthiesen; the same subject but different size

12. *Bust Portrait of a Girl in Grey, Wearing a Locket*
    9 × 7¼; oil on canvas

13. *The Brown Teapot*
$12\frac{1}{2} \times 9$; oil on canvas; this is a second version of no. 26 Matthiesen

14. *Bust Study of a Girl with a Red Shawl (Sketch)*
$9\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$; oil on canvas

15. *Red House in Twilight (Study)*
$11 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$; oil on paper; no. 55 Matthiesen

16. *Half-Length of a Girl with Folded Arms*
$12\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{3}{4}$; charcoal; no. 132 Matthiesen

17. *Half-Length of a Girl, Hands Resting in Her Lap*
$12\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{3}{4}$; charcoal and wash; no. 122 Matthiesen; LENT BY MATTHIESEN LTD.

18. *Three-Quarter Length of a Young Woman with High Cheek Bones*
$11 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$; brush and black wash; no. 90 Matthiesen

19. *Half-Length of a Small Boy in a High Crowned Hat*
$12\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{3}{4}$; charcoal and wash; no. 121 Matthiesen

20. *Self-Portrait of the Artist at the Age of About 20 Years*
$9\frac{3}{4} \times 8$; pencil and wash on buff paper; no. 57 Matthiesen; LENT ANONYMOUSLY

21. *Study of a Woman with Half-Closed Eyes*
$12\frac{1}{4} \times 9$; pencil and wash; no. 82 Matthiesen

22. *A Rustic Cottage Behind a Wall*
$9\frac{1}{2} \times 11$; gouache; no. 210 Matthiesen

23. *Portrait-Study of Fanella Lovell, Almost Half-Length*
$9\frac{7}{8} \times 8$; pencil and grey wash; no. 79 Matthiesen

24. *Rue Terre Neuve, Meudon, Seen from Artist's Window*
$8\frac{1}{4} \times 10\frac{3}{4}$; watercolour; no. 207 Matthiesen
Exhibited at the National Gallery, 1940, no. 345
Exhibited at the British Institute of Adult Education, 1941, no. 125

25. *Profile-Study of Arthur Symons, Dozing*
$9\frac{1}{4} \times 8$; black chalk; no. 106 Matthiesen

26. *Half-Length of a Girl with a Large Hat and Straw-Coloured Hair*
$8\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{7}{8}$; water-colour; no. 153 Matthiesen; LENT BY MATTHIESEN LTD.

27. *Half-Length of a Little Girl with a Fringe, Hands Clasped*
$11 \times 9\frac{1}{4}$; charcoal; no. 144 Matthiesen
Exhibited at the National Gallery, 1940, no. 681

28. *Three-Quarter Length of a Girl with a Sulky Expression*
$12\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{3}{4}$; charcoal and wash; no. 124 Matthiesen

29. *Similar Study of the Same Girl*
$10 \times 8\frac{1}{8}$; water-colour; no. 125 Matthiesen

30. *Tree Tops Against a Clouded Sky*
$9\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{5}{8}$; gouache; no. 209 Matthiesen

31. *Three-Quarter Length of a Girl in an Apron, with a Cat in her Lap*
$9\frac{1}{2} \times 6$; pencil (Study for the Painting no. 7); no. 84 Matthiesen

32. *Black Cat on Blue, Against a Pink Background*
$6\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{3}{4}$; pencil and water-colour; no. 186 Matthiesen

33. *Three-Quarter Back View of Two Orphan Girls, Kneeling*
$8 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$; gouache; no. 165 Matthiesen

34. *Pink Chrysanthemums in a Tall Grey Vase*
$6\frac{1}{8} \times 4\frac{7}{8}$; water-colour; no. 201 Matthiesen

35. *Tabby Curled Up and Looking Attentively*
$4\frac{3}{4} \times 6$; pencil, water-colour and gouache on buff paper; no. 191 Matthiesen

36. *Back View of Two Nuns and a Girl, Seated*
$6\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$; gouache; no. 169 Matthiesen

37. *Portrait of Winifred John Looking Down*
$6\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{4}$; pencil; no. 59 Matthiesen

38. *Pale Yellow Bloom against Two Fern Leaves*
$9\frac{7}{8} \times 6\frac{7}{8}$; gouache; no. 196 Matthiesen

39. *Foliage in a Red Jug*
$7\frac{7}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$; gouache; no. 195 Matthiesen

40. *A Peasant-Girl Seated, Hands folded in Her Lap*
$12\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$; charcoal

41. *Red House in a Garden with Trees*
$7\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$; pencil and gouache

42. *Half-Profile of a Little Girl Holding Flowers*
$9\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$; black chalk and wash

43. *Half-Length of a Girl Wearing a Hat, Hands Clasped over her Breast*
$9 \times 8\frac{3}{8}$; charcoal

44. *Bust of the Same Girl, Seated*
$6\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{4}$; charcoal and black chalk

45. *Half-Length of a Boy, Standing, Hands Clasped*
$12 \times 8\frac{5}{8}$; charcoal

46. *Three-Quarter Profiles of a Woman, an Orphan-Girl and a Nun, Sitting in Church*
$8\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$; gouache

47. *A Bunch of Flowers on a Striped Cloth*
$5\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$; gouache; LENT BY MATTHIESEN LTD.

48. *Young Woman Sewing*
$7 \times 6\frac{3}{8}$; pencil

49. *A Woman Asleep on a Sofa*
$5\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$; pencil and wash

50. *Girl Playing a Violin*
8×6; pencil

51. *Back View of a Black Cat Sitting Up*
$6\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$; gouache

52. *Study of a Duck*
$4\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{4}$; pencil

53. *Head of a Young Woman*
$5\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{4}$; black chalk

54. *Little Girl with a Wide-Brimmed Hat*
$5\frac{7}{8} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$; gouache

55. *"Petit Profil"*
$6\frac{1}{2} \times 6$; gouache

56. *Faded Dablias in a Grey Jug*
$7\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$; water-colour

57. *Tree Tops Against a Pink Sky*
$10\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{5}{8}$; gouache

58. *Portrait of the Artist's Sister Winifred Wearing a Flowered Hat*
12×9; charcoal

59. *Dorelia Sitting in a Landscape*
$11\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$; brush and grey wash; no. 67 Matthiesen; LENT BY MICHAEL ASTOR, M.P.

60. *Portrait of the Artist's Sister Winifred*
$12\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$; black chalk on buff paper; LENT BY AUGUSTUS JOHN, O.M., R.A

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